



RANTS & RAVES

While Mel Croucher issues a fearsome curse on a Polish airline that tricked him out of his personal data, Simon Edwards reveals the curse that has brought his life to a standstill

IN DENIAL



MEL CROUCHER RANTS

Well it's one for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, now go online and book an air ticket. Let me continue. You can burn my house, steal my car, drink my liquor from an old fruit-jar, do anything that you want to do, but uh-uh honey, don't insult my intelligence.

If you'd like to know why I'm not quite singing *Blue Suede Shoes*, here's the story.

I needed to visit the birthplace of my grandmother, which is in Poland. Like many other web-savvy cheapskates, I scoured my favourite sites for the best deals, screen-grabbed what I needed for reference and carefully erased my electronic data-trail behind me, more out of habit than paranoia.

The best deal was offered by Centralwings, a low-cost subsidiary of the Polish national airline, and for seven-and-a-half days it displayed the same price – a mere £109 return – on its website. The reason I hesitated so long was because I didn't like the amount of

information they requested, including bank details, username, password, telephone number, plus all the usual credit card stuff. But a bargain is a bargain. I checked the SSL certificate online and all was well, so I made the booking.

It was a five-stage process, and at every stage the quoted price was the same, including taxes and booking fees. Then they insulted my intelligence. After seven-and-a-half days, they hiked the price to £244.52p the moment I hit the Confirm button. And that was no bargain. I cancelled the booking, of course, but only after they had

conned my personal data out of me by what I consider to be illegal trading practices.

POLES APART

I accused Centralwings in writing of priming their database to display fake availability of bargain tickets, and automatically increasing the advertised price after sucking secure private data out of their victims. I gave them ample time and opportunity to refute my accusations, and stated that if they did not respond with a grovelling apology I would take that as an admission of guilt. They did not respond with a grovelling apology, and I pondered my next move.

Being a pacifist, and remembering that I was going to Poland to commemorate victims of war, I took succour from the recent cyber-attack by Russia on Estonia, one of the most wired nations in the world. When the Russians got narked by their wee neighbours for removing a Soviet war memorial, they launched the most



coordinated Denial of Service campaign ever on Estonian websites run by the government, news organisations and banks, and the country ground to a halt. The war was over in three weeks. Not a shot was fired. This is a brilliant idea, and I urge all international conflicts and civil wars to be resolved in a similar way. Instead of bombing the enemy, leave rude messages in their guestbook. Sell their assets on eBay. Spam them into submission.

As for my revenge on Centralwings for insulting my intelligence, Piotr Kociolk, their chief executive officer, resigned for "personal reasons". His replacement, Maciej Kwiatkowski, said he would spend the rest of this year "addressing cost reduction issues". His name was eleventh on the list of candidates after the previous 10 were rejected by the board and the company posted record losses. I think they have suffered enough. Peace in our time – just don't insult my intelligence.

COMPUTERS CAN BE FUN



**SIMON EDWARDS
RAVES**

Like anyone who works for *Shopper*, I believe in value for money. This is another way of saying I am tight. For years I have picked the less expensive choice over the luxury option, buying small cars, unknown brands of MP3 players, AMD rather than Intel processors, Marks & Spencer underwear instead of... I'm so cheap I don't even know what the high-end choice of Y-fronts is. As a result, I've saved cash while being able to drive around, listen to digital music files, do computery things and save on trouser laundry bills.

However, I have discovered the joys of spending a bit more (well, quite a lot more) and having a much nicer time. I recently did some web design work that required the latest version of Photoshop. I have never used this program properly. I've always thought Paint Shop Pro to be more than good enough, and it is certainly capable of doing the photo-editing tasks most of us perform. But despite my almost complete inexperience with it, I found Photoshop was miles more intuitive than a program I already know inside out.

It also costs miles more. In fact, it costs 10 times more. Whether you buy it as a standalone product or as part of Adobe's CS3 range, you face a serious bill. The basic Photoshop package costs over £500 and the cheapest CS3 bundle that includes it is just shy of a grand. Corel Paint Shop Pro, however, costs £50. Tightwads rejoice! If you just want to mess around with your digital photos, it's clearly the only sane, sensible option. Sensible is boring, though, and I can't help remembering what a pleasure it was to use Photoshop.

THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

Pleasure is something that is often missing when using computers. After that initial thrill, when you discover how much faster your new system is than your old one, using a PC is rarely pleasurable (and if it is, you're probably doing something I don't want to hear about). For most of us, it is a fight with crashing applications, attempts to work around badly implemented interfaces and general compromise.

We're so used to compromising, we don't realise we're doing it most of the time. Blue screen errors? Turn it off and on again. Explorer has crashed? Reboot. Word has stopped responding? Ctrl-Alt-Del, Applications tab, select task, click

End Task. If you can relate to these Pavlovian responses to PC problems, you can see how we take our PC's rubbishness for granted. You need a certain amount of fatalism to be a PC user and remain non-violent.

Some of the most popular articles you'll find in magazines and online are related to optimising your PC's performance. There are hundreds of tutorials on how to edit bits of the Registry so Windows works in an ergonomic way. Should these be necessary? Shouldn't the operating system designers have made the most useful choices to begin with? And should you have to use special software to edit a weird database of obscure settings? Clearly not.

APPLE OF MY EYE

It's all a bit like hard work, isn't it? I used a Mac recently. It was a little, white Intel-based thing running OS X. I hadn't used an Apple computer properly since they came as small beige boxes with tiny glass monitors built in. And God, was this easy to use. Within a couple of hours, I had created a website, podcast, online video and a streaming media server, all using the software that came with the computer and without any previous experience.

You've probably seen the PC v Mac adverts that feature Mitchell and Webb. Just about every other computer magazine columnist has written about the humorous video advert that has appeared all over the internet and was ripped apart by erstwhile colleague Charlie Brooker in the *Guardian* (<http://tinyurl.com/2984g9>). The message of the advert is that PCs are crashing monstrosities of poorly thought-out collections of third-rate software utilities, whereas a Mac is the paragon of design: easy to use, lovely to behold and just, well, lovely. Even from my horribly biased position as a long-time PC user, I'm afraid I have to agree.

Computers are supposed to make life easier by doing a lot of the work for you. Sometimes it's worth spending more just so you can stop wasting energy fighting the system, get the job done and possibly even enjoy doing it.

CURSES!



**SIMON EDWARDS
RANTS**

Belief in curses is widespread through many cultures and religions. Curses are usually frowned upon by so-called established religions, who mostly specialise in removing rather than casting them. But it would be rare to find a religion that failed to

acknowledge the curse as a powerful tool. For example, I know a Roman Catholic priest who is adamant that he could set a curse against someone who threatened his flock. I also know a priest who is convincing in his belief that he once performed an exorcism on a poltergeist.

Like it or not, curses exist (if only in the minds of those who either hand them out or believe they have received them). A month or two ago, I discovered that I am a believer. In fact, I am actually a curse victim and even know who levied the foul hex upon me. It was an otherwise lovely chap called Luke, who is in charge of the cover discs on our magazines.

Early one afternoon, following a meeting about those exciting and great-value cover discs, Luke and I sat in his office. As the golden sun streamed in through his skylight window, he looked at me over his desk with his evil eye and spat out a series of cryptic words. Since then, my life has been in tatters. Dare I tell you what he said? I fear that if I print his words on this page, you too will fall under his power. Your life will effectively come to a standstill.

Shunned by your friends, distant to your loved ones, you will be left wandering a cloudy, insubstantial world of your own. Nothing will ever satisfy you. Food will be tasteless, sleep (ha!) a long-forgotten memory. You might even start to go blind.

SAVE YOURSELF

As I scrawl these words, half-sighted, grizzled and wondering if they are the last I will ever write, I believe I must take this secret incantation to my grave. And yet! I cannot. I am, driven out of my very mind, compelled to tell you. One last remaining shred of humanity allows me to encrypt it so that the casual reader will be saved.

You, dear soul, have one last chance. Should you visit this link, you will be transported to a place from which no-one I know has ever returned. At first, you'll embrace the wonders therein, but how quickly this sweet mistress turns so very, very sour.

Final chance. Dare you enter to taste the delights within? If you do, start your quest at <http://tinyurl.com/2zjocv>. Did you go? Yes? I pity you. I really pity you.

Use this information wisely. Just because your life is ruined does not mean you should destroy the lives of friends or even enemies. Do not pass this on unless you really want to doom someone to a life of mindless staring, pointing, clicking and, well, cursing. ☹